





Farm Women & Egg Money

From the turn of the century through World War II, Iowa was the nation's leading producer of eggs. Iowa's egg production came mostly from small flocks like those that Mary Wear Briggs cared for as a child (see previous article). And, as in the Wear family, farm children often fed and watered the chickens. But farm women almost always managed the poultry operations. Women learned the trade first from their mothers, but gained additional information from extension programs and farm journals, such as *Wallaces' Farmer*. It was important to manage flocks effectively, because good management often meant the difference between profit and loss in the poultry operation.

Eggs and poultry were the most common sources of cash income for farm women in the first third of the 20th century. Usually, farm women took their eggs to town to trade them for groceries or other goods. Often, no money changed hands; merchants simply kept a

running account that the women drew on for purchases.

It is easy to underestimate the economic contribution poultry operations made to farm families, particularly during the farm depressions of the 1920s and 1930s. Often, egg money was the only cash income available for purchasing essential household items as well as food and clothing. Manufacturers like Monarch advertised that women could use their poultry receipts to make monthly payments on appliances (see right). And occasionally, such income was used to maintain or expand the overall farm operation. Clearly, women and children made essential economic contributions to their families' farm operations by managing their poultry operations.

—adapted by Marvin Bergman from Deborah Fink and Dorothy Schwieder, "Iowa Farm Women in the 1930s: A Reassessment," *Annals of Iowa* 49 (1989), 574-79.

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At terms so low as this, most farm women can spare the money to make the monthly payments out of their own income, from poultry, butter, garden truck or other farm produce sold throughout the year.

Left: Clara Triska feeds chickens (Henry County, early 1940s). Top: Mrs. Shonkweiler (Emmet County) stands proudly by her fine chicken house, essential for healthy, productive hens.